

# Flower of Scotland

Charlotte Higgins

A play that has taken the Edinburgh festival by storm shows what a truly national theatre can do

It was barely a week into Edinburgh's August festivals when one work leapt out as the play, above all others, for which 2006 will surely be remembered. It is true that there is still a great amount of theatre yet to be unveiled at the festivals, including keenly anticipated productions by Peter Stein and Anthony Neilson. But it is hard to imagine any work topping the reaction to Gregory Burke's new drama *Black Watch*: standing ovations from audiences; Scottish and English critics unanimously rapturous; no fewer than eight five-star reviews in the papers.

There are many reasons why *Black Watch* – which tells the story of Scotland's famous regiment through the words of soldiers serving in Iraq – is so impressive. Its use of documentary “verbatim” material, gleaned from interviews with former soldiers, is handled with sophistication, and the ethics of its use is delicately questioned within the drama itself. It is beautifully acted and directed. Its setting and design – it takes place in a disused drill hall – is brilliantly suited to its content. It has moments of great beauty and emotion when the play moves into glorious sequences of song or movement. (This sounds ghastly; I promise you it is not.)

Some will question the fact that the tale is told so completely from a Scottish perspective, with never the faintest hint of an Iraqi voice. Some will question the notion that the play seems to invite us to lament the passing (given the recent amalgamation of the Scottish regiments) of an institution that should properly be regarded as a brutal killing machine rather than an object of national pride. A character at one point suggests that the *Black Watch* was made great over 300 years and destroyed over three, “pissing about in the desert in the biggest western foreign-policy disaster ever”; yet surely many of the conflicts in which the *Black Watch* served down the centuries, in Africa, Crimea and India, were as

imperialistic in ideology and as cack-handed in execution as Iraq.

No one, however, will question the drama's deep humanity – and the extraordinary confidence with which it has been presented by the National Theatre of Scotland. For with *Black Watch* the NTS – still in its first year, and the single cultural creation of the Scottish parliament, which announced its foundation in 2003 – shows that it has arrived. This is a true piece of “national” theatre – telling the urgent contemporary, human stories that lie at the back end of grand politics and the sweep of history – that never looks parochial or narrowly nationalistic. To all the scepticism and debate about Scotland's even needing a national theatre, to all the sometimes self-lacerating, politically fraught recent inquiries into the devolved nation's culture, the new NTS has slapped down the best kind of answer: rather than more words, a most eloquent piece of work.

The NTS could well set an agenda south of the border. One of its early decisions was to have no home venue. Instead it elected to tour productions to remote rural areas, work in theatres in cities such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and create site-specific work. (It has already staged a piece, with the brilliant young company Grid Iron, in Edinburgh airport.) *Black Watch*, in its drill-hall setting, is proof of what a liberating idea this was. Suddenly the NTS is making other arts organisations look a touch old-fashioned. Does the fact that the National Theatre in London inhabits such a definite home seem a little limiting by comparison, despite the virtues of its three Denys Lasdun-designed auditoria? Were English National Opera not constrained by occupying the biggest theatre in the city could it not make work that was miles more interesting, varied and exciting than that which it is has to do now? These are questions worth contemplating; in the meantime, you have until the end of the month to marvel at the wonderful *Black Watch*.

